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ABSTRACT

This Middlebury College summer 1974 commencement address is an informal presentation of the author's experiences as a language learner. The effectiveness of such pedagogical methods as the grammar-translation, audio-lingual, and "balanced" approaches, and of language learning with the aid of an informant, is discussed. It is concluded that, given adequate motivation, any method seems to work. In particular, the audio-lingual approach (without its excesses) proved highly effective. The author wonders whether those who now condemn the audio-lingual method have themselves ever been language learners rather than merely language teachers.
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Confessions of a Language Learner

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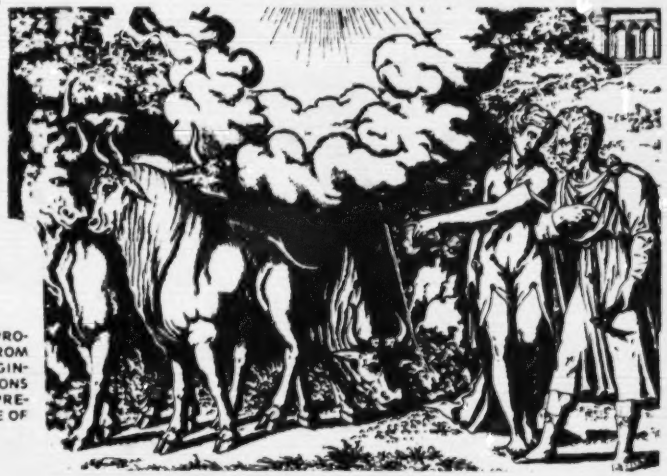

By William G. Moulton

From the remarks just made, you already know that I am a linguist and a language teacher. More important, perhaps, is the fact that all my life I have also been a language *learner*—and a passionate one. Furthermore, almost from the start I had at least an indirect connection with Middlebury.

My first foreign language was French. Though my memory for exact details is now understandably a bit hazy, I believe that it was in the second grade that I first learned to sing "Frère Jacques." We got the first two lines right: "Frère Jacques, Frère Jacques. Dormez-vous? Dormez-vous?" But we had our own delightfully original and nonsensical version of the third line. It went like this: "Celle mène tine, Celle mène tine." I don't know how to spell this, but I still know how to sing it. And the fact that it had no meaning did not bother us at all. Nor did it do me, at least, any harm.

My first serious learning of French began, as I recall, in the seventh grade. That would have been back in 1925. And my teacher, Richard Buffum, was fresh from a summer at Middlebury. Now there were two things about Mr. Buffum that puzzled us. First, he had a passion for phonetic symbols, and it took us some time before we realized how useful they can really be. Second, he outrageously insisted that French should be pronounced not with English sounds but with French sounds. Some of us actually managed to do this, more or less. I particularly remember how he taught us to pronounce French *i* and *u*. For *i* you stuck the point of a pencil between your teeth, grinned, and then said it: *i, i, i.* As for *u*, you kept the inside of your mouth in the same position, but instead of grinning you puckered your lips: *u, u, u.* I even remember the classic sentence he had us say in order to practice this sound. It was: "Une prune brune sur le mur."

My introduction to German was vastly different from this. Somehow or other, in French I had gotten a year or two ahead of myself, and our excellent but modest little school had run out of courses for me. So it was decided that I should learn German—to be taught to me in a class of one by the Latin teacher, who had once had a couple of years of German in college. And so for two years I learned German, taught just as if it were Latin. And I really mean that—just as if it were Latin. Why this did not forever ruin my taste for German I shall never know. But it didn't; and it didn't even stop me from *learning* German. This is an important point to which we'll return later.

From the start, then, I was exposed to two vastly different methods of foreign language teaching. And this continued right on into college. I shall never forget the difference between my French and German courses in my freshman year. In the French course, only French was spoken; and instead of translating our readings into English, we paraphrased each sentence in our own words in French—with excellent corrections and discussion by the instructor. As for German, each class went like this. The instructor started off by opening his copy of Heine's *Harzreise* and saying. "Let's see. Last time we stopped at page 48, line 12. Mr. Moulton, would you please begin translating at line 13?" And then for perhaps ten lines I stumbled through a miserable English mangling of this superbly witty book, until the instructor stopped me with a "Thank you," wrote down a grade in his little book, and then said: "Mr. Smith, will you please continue?" And so it went, for 50 minutes. This was the "grammar-translation method" with a vengeance. Not until my senior year

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did I take a German course in which only German was spoken. Yet the astonishing fact is that I really *did* learn some German. I later even *majored* in German—choosing it over French because I did not know it as well and wanted to learn more.

Once started with foreign languages, I just couldn't stop. I took Latin for one year (I had had six years of it in school); I took French for two years (and spent a summer in France); I took Italian for two years; and I majored in German (and spent a summer in Germany). After graduation I studied for a year in Germany and dabbled in Russian, Swedish, and ancient Greek—learning really only German in the process, but having a great time nonetheless. Back in this country for graduate study, I spent most of my time on things like Gothic, Old Norse, Old English, Old and Middle High German, Sanskrit, Comparative Grammar of Greek and Latin, plus again Swedish—which again did not "take."

During World War II, I supervised Japanese language instruction in six Far East Civil Affairs Training Schools (for future military government officers). I learned enough Japanese at least to keep ahead of the officer-students when I went on inspection trips. Today, because I have not kept it up, my Japanese is all gone. At age 40 I spent a year in Holland and learned Dutch. I am happy to say that this did "take," and that I still speak it very well, thank you. At age 45 I spent a year in Switzerland and learned Swiss German. Switzerland has 22 cantons; I speak the dialect of canton number 23; I speak it with only modest fluency; but at least I speak it well enough to amaze the natives.

Quite seriously, I sometimes wonder whether in this country we should not spend less time on the "big" languages—French, German, Spanish, Russian, Japanese, Chinese—and more time on the "little" languages. For purposes of international understanding and general good will, a modest knowledge of—let us say—French is of little use. A Frenchman expects any civilized human being to know French (how else could he be "civilized"?), just as we expect any civilized human being to know English. With the "little" languages, on the other hand, matters are very different. From my personal experience I know that the Dutch are immensely pleased if one has taken the trouble to learn their language, however imperfectly. And I suspect that the same thing is true with such other "little" languages as Danish, Swedish, Czech, Bulgarian. As for the Swiss, they are amazed and delighted when an American (of all things) can speak any type of Swiss German at all.

The title which I have given to my remarks this evening is, "Confessions of a Language Learner." Let me now turn from "language learning" (a topic about which I think I know something) to "language teaching" (a topic about which no one really knows very much, and about which I surely know no more than you do). During my lifetime, at least four different methods of language teaching have been promulgated as the salvation of mankind: the "grammar-translation method," represented by my own training in German; the "direct method," represented more or less by my own training in French; the "audiolingual method," which came into vogue in the 1950's; and now the "cognitive method," which represents the latest salvation for mankind and is somehow vaguely associated with Noam Chomsky's revolutionary "transformational-generative grammar" in linguistics.

Where does salvation truly lie? For me, personally, any old method seemed to work. My French instruction was well-balanced from the start. It taught me all four of the basic skills: understanding, speaking, reading, and writing. (By "writing" I mean of course only the very simple writing that we expect of our students: more advanced writing requires years of practice, even in our own language; and many of us never achieve it even then.) As I look back on it now, I realize that my French instruction could have been more effective if it had contained a larger dose of what we now call "contrastive analysis"—highlighting the points of contrast between the source language and the target language, and paying special attention to them. So that is one useful thing learned in the meantime: contrastive analysis can be very helpful.

My German instruction was far less well-balanced than this, since it was pretty much limited to grammar and translation. However, I was able to make up for this defect by being active in a German club, and in particular by taking part in a number of German plays. This was a magnificent experience. It is today fashionable to downgrade the value of memorizing and of role-playing. Nonsense! Don't you believe it! Both memorizing and role-playing can be enormously effective. They are ineffective only if they are not accompanied by other tyes of learning, such as grammar and reading. That is a secord useful thing that I learned.

Because the audiolingual method is today held in such low esteem by so many people, let me say just a bit more about it. This year, for the second time in my life, I let myself get talked into giving an introductory course in Dutch. As I did so, I realized once again how

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much of my Dutch is based on sheer habit—hundreds of little expressions that I memorized twenty years ago in Holland, that I have used occasionally since then, and that just come out automatically. Of course, I have to "think" when I try to say more complicated things, far more than I have to "think" in English—and I surely make mistakes. But these hundreds of little expressions just come out by themselves—things like "Hoe maakt U het?", "Mooi weer vandaag," "Waar gaat U naar toe?", "Tot de volgende keer." I purposely call these things "habits," because "habit" is supposed to be a dirty word these days. This, at least, is the opinion of many of my colleagues in linguistics who have considered the matter from a theoretical point of view. As one who has actually *learned* a few languages, I can only say: Habit (like memorization) and role-playing) is not a dirty word in *my* language learning experience.

But let me return to some further language learning experiences. When I tackled Japanese and Dutch, I was able to use the audiolingual method—though the texts which I used were written before that term had been invented. (They were the so-called "Army language manuals"—Bernard Bloch's for Japanese and Leonard Bloomfield's for Dutch.) In the case of Japanese, I benefited from "individualized instruction": I used to pay a young Japanese-American to come after-hours to my office in the old Munitions Building in Washington. The instruction was a bit unusual, since it was the student who told the teacher what to do rather than vice versa. But it worked, and it worked well.

As for Dutch, I got a Dutch student to record on tape all of the basic sentences and practice conversations in Bloomfield's Dutch manual, and I then learned Dutch by shouting back at the tape recorder. This, too, worked well. Of course, when I got to Holland I found that the Dutch did not always speak basic sentences. Yet it was amazing how much of what they said consisted of bits and pieces of the different basic sentences that I had memorized. Fortunately, Bloomfield's manual had given me practice in just that: combining part of basic sentence 126 with part of basic sentence 247 so as to give a new sentence. And, of course, the manual also contained lots of grammar. So that was another useful thing that I learned: the audiolingual method works, and works well—provided one is not foolish enough to think that it consists only of memorizing basic sentences. (I must add here that, in the summer of 1942, I was a student in an experimental Russian course which did consist solely in the memorization of basic sentences. The results were, predictably, disastrous—and I still know practically no Russian.)

Now, finally, my learning of Swiss German. This was the hardest of all—not because it is hard as such (especially if you already know standard German), but because there are no textbooks for it and because in effect it does not exist in written form. When the Swiss write, they write plain ordinary German. As a result, you cannot read a Swiss German book, and you cannot buy a Swiss German newspaper. The only way you can get at Swiss German (in its many varieties) is from the mouth of a native speaker. I did just that, having a university student come several times a week to our one-room apartment (we were living on a very meager grant that year), getting him to talk, imitating what he said, writing it down in my own transcription, and then having him make tape recordings that I could use for practice. As a result, I learned not the dialect of Zurich but the dialect of that 23rd canton. Still, it amazes the natives. And I learned two further useful things. First, a well-designed instructional manual is of enormous help. This is of course obvious. Second, if understanding and speaking cannot be reinforced by reading and writing, the learning job is just that much harder. If I had been ten years old, I could easily have picked up a fluent Zurich German from my playmates. But I was 45 years old, and the lack of reading materials was a great handicap. (Still another handicap is the fact that Swiss radio programs are nearly always in standard German. The only exceptions are a few programs for the housewife; and even these are always in some dialect different from the one you are trying to learn—for example the dialect of Basel, when you are trying to learn the dialect of Zurich).

In speaking of learning, I need consider only a single learner—myself. But in speaking of teaching, I must consider all sorts of learners, of many different types. Nevertheless, you undoubtedly expect some words of wisdom about language teaching, so here goes. But please take everything I say with a large grain of salt: Remember I'm only one of many "experts" whose opinions have been inflicted upon you.

What should every language teacher know? How should language teachers be trained? It is obvious that they should know as much as possible about the language they are teaching. Less obvious is the fact that they should also know as much as possible about the language of their students—which is to say, in our case, the many varieties of American English. Only in this way can teachers make the kind of "contrastive analysis" mentioned earlier—pinpointing those conflicts between the source language and the target language that can predictably cause trouble, and that always do cause trouble. Regrettably, perhaps, this type of knowledge has often been presented as "linguistics". I don't care what you call it, we've got to know it. If we don't, we will not understand the reasons for many of the mistakes that our students make. And if we understand only *that* they make these mistakes, and not *why* they make these mistakes, we will be that much less effective as foreign language teachers. (Contrastive analysis has often been criticized because it

does not explain *all* the mistakes our students make. But no one ever claimed that it could explain *all* these mistakes. It just explains an awful lot of them.)

The second big question is: what teaching method should we use? By now you know my prejudices. I simply do not believe that there is any one teaching method that will solve all our problems (or, indeed, that all our problems will ever be solved). I see virtues in all teaching methods. Call this eclecticism, if you wish; but that has been my experience, both as learner and as teacher. Above all, I would urge you to beware of the latest "fads." Let me explain.

Back in 1942-43, my German-born wife and I wrote what can probably be called the first "audiolingual" introduction to German. This was just one of the "Army language manuals" of those years, all written according to the same general plan, including Bloch's Japanese, Bloomfield's Dutch, Moulton and Moulton's German, and a score of others. Either as teacher, student, or both, I later used the Japanese, Dutch, and German manuals; and I found them highly effective for intensive language courses. (Today, of course, they are hopelessly out of date.) It took about a decade before the methodology of these manuals caught on, and before the term "audiolingual" was invented. When these new ideas *did* catch on, however, they became a fad and were grossly distorted. I watched in horror as it all happened. There was talk of a "linguistic method" of language teaching—about as silly as speaking of a "botanical method" of growing flowers. Somehow the word got around that the "linguists" had abandoned grammar (can you imagine anything more unlikely than a bunch of linguists abandoning grammar? Linguists *love* grammar!), and that all our students had to do was to memorize, parrotlike, huge batches of basic sentences. There were of course advantages to the audiolingual method: it placed a new and much-needed emphasis on understanding and speaking. Yet it also led to great disillusionment. Since grammar had been thrown out the window, it was soon found that students who could parrot basic sentences could do nothing else. And when pattern drills were invented, it was also discovered that students could perform them beautifully and yet learn next to nothing in the process.

Eventually, of course, a reaction set in. If I read the *Modern Language Journal* correctly, the latest fad is the "cognitive method." I am still not quite sure just what it is, yet I *am* sure that you and I can learn some useful things from it. So let us do so. Let us keep up with the latest ideas, as they are presented in our professional journals and at our professional meetings. If we do *not* do this, we shall forever remain dull hacks —not with 10, 20, or 30 years of language teaching experience, but with only one year of language teaching experience repeated 10, 20, or 30 times over and over again. At the same time, let us not look at each new idea as the ultimate salvation of mankind. We should be open-minded enough to accept what is good in the new; but we should not be so narrow-minded as to give up each time all that was good in the old. (Perhaps it is not necessary for me to give you this rather trite advice. As I visit language classes in schools and colleges, I find that this is what really good language teachers have been doing all along, anyhow.)

Occasionally even the most enthusiastic language learner gets his comeuppance. I got mine a couple of years ago, and the story can serve as a fitting conclusion to these remarks.

It was at the 11th International Congress of Linguists, in Bologna, in the late summer of 1972. I went there as U.S. delegate, resigned that position, and was promptly rewarded by the honor and headache of being elected president of the international organization of linguists that sponsors these congresses—CIPL, the Comité International Permanent des Linguistes. Our closing session was held not in Bologna but in Florence; and as newly elected president I was of course expected to make the final address, summing up the congress and thanking our Italian hosts.

It was a glorious occasion. There I was in the historic Signoria, facing a thousand congress members from all over the world and flanked on the podium by assorted Italian dignitaries. Because the official languages of the congress are always English and French, I wrote the first third of my address in English and the second third in French; and because we were in Italy, I wrote out the final third in English and had it translated into Italian—which I can at least pronounce, even if I can't write a speech in it. The whole thing was a smashing success. By the time my address was over, I actually had the Italian secretary of the congress and the Italian president of the congress embracing each other on the podium. The whole place was practically dripping with international good will and general good fellowship.

Later, back in Bologna, as I was getting ready to leave, I ran into a fellow member of the Executive Committee, the distinguished Swedish linguist and phonetician, Bertil Malmberg. Some of you may know his work, because he generally writes in French and about French. He complimented me on the brilliance of my closing address. Since I knew that he knew that my Italian is limited to tourist talk, I replied: "Well, thanks—and what did you think of my Italian?" "Not bad," he replied. And then it came: "Frankly, Moulton, it was better than your French."

Ladies and gentlemen, some of you are already language teachers, and some of you are about to become language teachers. To all of you I say: Welcome to a noble and happy profession. I know that you will enjoy it as much as I have. □